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### **TELEVISION REPAIR SCAMMER SENTENCED: JOHN "VINNY" JOHNSON--BIG SCREEN TV / BEST TV** *Consumer Victims Sought for Return of 194 TVs and VCRs*

**San Diego, CA:** The scam is over! John Joseph "Vinny" Johnson owner/operator of Big Screen TV of San Diego and Best TV is headed to jail. Johnson was sentenced today by San Diego Superior Court Judge Frank Brown to three years in custody, ordered to pay victim restitution, forfeit 194 TVs and VCRs seized from his storefront and home, relinquish his license to operate as an electronic repair dealer and pay unpaid sales taxes to the State. The defendant, also known as John Zawatski and John Palumbo, pleaded guilty to ten criminal counts including grand theft, forgery, fraud, false advertising, making misleading statements and failure to pay sales taxes.

The courtroom was filled with about two dozen irate consumer victims. Many spoke to the Judge and expressed their anger and frustration with the defendant who took their money and lied to them about the status of their TVs. The majority never got their TVs back from Johnson. According to San Diego Deputy City Attorney Cindy Davis, unclaimed TVs and VCRs will be liquidated and the bulk of the proceeds will go to the victims.

San Diego City Attorney Casey Gwinn praised consumers for their participation in the prosecution. "Without consumers who were willing to step forward and file complaints and work with our Consumer Unit, we simply would not have been able to successfully prosecute this case. We hope this case encourages and empowers consumers to be proactive, come forward, and participate in the legal process."

The case began when numerous consumers complained that San Diego Big Screen TV failed to return their big screen televisions or made faulty repairs at significant expense. The California Department of Consumer Affairs' Bureau of Electronic and Appliance Repair (BEAR) investigated consumer complaints and

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## BIG SCREEN TV SENTENCING

operated two undercover stings at the store. The complaints and the stings revealed that Johnson routinely made false statements to customers, failed to return televisions sets, gave back parts to consumers from other televisions and generally engaged in fraudulent activity.

The case came to the San Diego City Attorney's Consumer and Environmental Protection Unit for continued investigation and prosecution. After discovering Johnson had moved a number of big screen televisions to a storage facility and was being evicted from his storefront on El Cajon Boulevard, the City Attorney, with the assistance of BEAR and the San Diego Police Department, executed search warrants at Johnson's home, storage unit, and store. As a result of the raid, 194 TVs, VCRs, camcorders, and computers valued at more than \$80,000 were impounded.

Once the media alerted the public of the raid, a large number of consumers stepped forward to file complaints and offer assistance. Over 106 consumers have filed complaints against the defendant. A criminal complaint containing over 200 counts was filed. In the early morning hours of January 15, 2003, Johnson was arrested in his home in Rolando.

The partnership between the consumers and the prosecutors is only one of many partnerships which resulted in success. Brian Stiger, Chief of the Bureau of Electronic and Appliance Repair, praised the teamwork between the Bureau and the City Attorney's Office. "The bottom line for consumers is having resources available if they have a complaint, and having someone stand behind them and take action," said Stiger. "The Bureau's resources on the investigations side, and the San Diego City Attorney's work to lead the prosecution of this case, were a great one-two punch."

The final phase of the case will be to reunite the consumers with their TVs and VCRs. Victims of Big Screen TV of San Diego, Best TV, Delta Best TV, AAA Widescreen TV or AAA Reliable Big Screen TV, who are still missing TVs, VCRs, or other electronic items, are urged to contact the City Attorney's Consumer and Environmental Protection Helpline at 619-533-5600.

